

**Box 4. Silence of Conscientious Objectors**



**List of contents**

1. White feathers
2. Zappar code attached to the feathers

**Key information:**

- Conscientious Objectors (COs) were also nicknamed conchies.
- Conscription was introduced in Britain by the Military Service Act in January 1916, when it was realised that the war was going to continue and after Britain suffered high casualties. Before 1916, when WW1 first broke out, Britain's army was made up of volunteers.
- Conscription targeted single men from 19-41 years old, but this was extended to include married men. By 1918 the age range included men up to the age of 50.
- Under the Military Service Act certain people were exempt from military service: if they had health issues or had vital war occupations, such as coal mining or farming.
- Conscientious Objectors – claimed exemption against conscription on the grounds of their beliefs (pacifist, political or religious).
- COs had to face a military tribunal but often their reasons for refusing to fight were rejected and they were sentenced to hard labour in prison, where they faced harsh conditions and were subjected to terrible treatment. Some even died in prison. Those who survived the prison sentence and were released, were sometimes rearrested afterwards as deserters, court-martialled and sent back to prison. This is the 'Cat and Mouse' treatment referred to in the attached film *He Refused to Fight* accessed via a Zappar code.
- Conscientious objectors and their families became targets of abuse for not supporting their country. Propaganda was used to make them feel ashamed of their beliefs and actions and the white feathers were part of that propaganda, being attached to the clothes to publicly humiliated them.
- Sometimes people made mistakes and gave a feather to a soldier who was home on leave or had been wounded and in his civilian clothes. This was considered an insult.
- 7,000 Conscientious Objectors performed non-combat duties, such as stretcher bearers on the front line, but some called absolutists/ pacifists refused any war related work - 1,500 refused all military service.
- Even after the war had finished COs found it hard to return to jobs or secure work because of the beliefs they had held during the war. This impacted on generations. (Watch *He Refused to Fight*)

**Zappar code:**

**He Refused to Fight**

Download the Zappar app on a smart phone or tablet. Hover over the code below watch a 4 minute film in which Donald Saunders (who lives in Wales) tells of his father's imprisonment as a Conscientious Objector in WW1, the consequences for his family, and his own decision to be a CO in World War Two.



**Box 4. Silence of Conscientious Objectors: questions**



1. Why do you think there are white feathers in this box?
2. How do they feel to touch?
3. Can you find the zappar code on the feather and play the film?

4. How does that story make you feel?
5. Conscientious Objectors believed that it is wrong to kill another human being under any circumstance. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
6. How would you have felt to be handed a feather? How do you think his family felt?



7. Do you think it is cowardly to refuse to fight? Why?
8. Do you feel his father was a coward or brave to refuse to fight?
9. Would you stand up for your beliefs against a government you felt was wrong, even if it meant you would go to prison?



### Suggested box combinations

- **Box 6 The Silence of the Aftermath of War** (considering how they and other people were treated after the war)
- **Box 8 Silence of Propaganda** (considering how they were given white feathers as part of a propaganda campaign)
- **Box 13 Silence of Religion – Tea and sympathy** Quakers and the religious case for conscientious objection

### Suggested Activities

- **Class debate:** Split the group into half – half are to be against war, against killing another human being and the other half to be pro war. Each side has to research and present their argument, debating the pro and cons of war
- **Create an image:** that promotes feelings to encourage people not to fight
- Visit <http://www.breakingbarriers.org.uk/voices-of-conscience/> and watch the short digital story films where people talk about family members who were conscientious objectors. Download the detailed Education Pack (available in Welsh and English)

### Caring for the box after use

- Please place the feathers carefully back in the box
- If there is a problem with the Zappar code, please let us know